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ABSTRACT

Diversion projects in California (Los Angeles and Orange Counties) were monitored using client tracking, a simple and basic evaluation procedure. Client tracking was used to provide information about three points in the diversion process: referral to the project, service delivery, and the outcome of the diversion services. The data provided an overall description of the clients and the project and were used to assess the project's success in meeting certain goals. For example, the finding of a high number of service no-shows and early dropouts helped to change the procedure for assigning clients to service providers. Data sources, data collection, and data processing are all areas which need consideration when implementing client tracking, and practical problems such as convincing non-research-oriented employees to keep accurate records must also be dealt with. (Author/BP)

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CLIENT TRACKING

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Client tracking is perhaps the simplest and most basic of evaluation procedures. In our evaluations of the diversion projects in Los Angeles and Orange Counties, we have used client tracking to provide monitoring information about the three points in the diversion process: referral to the project, service delivery, and the outcome of the diversion services. The data provide an overall description of the clients and the project and can be used as a basic data set to assess the project's success in meeting its objectives. For the diversion projects, these goals may include serving certain types of clients or achieving a targeted recidivism rate. Information fed back to the project staff and boards can identify areas needing improvement and suggest ways to adjust procedures to attain more successful outcomes and overall functioning. In this way, basic client and project information can become part of a larger management information system for the project. An example of the use of our findings to improve overall project functioning can be seen in the Los Angeles County projects. Here our finding of a high number of service no-shows and early dropouts helped to change the procedure for assigning clients to service providers.

The aspects of client tracking that I will address here are the data sources, data collection, and data processing. I will also mention some problems that we have had to deal with in this part of our evaluation.

First, let us consider the data sources. Referral forms, client intake and service forms, and the Central Juvenile Index (or the CJI) are the three

CG013078

primary sources of data that we have used for client tracking and project monitoring. The three Los Angeles County projects are in the broker model, contracting with community agencies on a fee-for-service basis. Their client files contain basic demographic information and the reason for referral as supplied by the referral agents (e.g., police, schools, or other agencies), and a minimum of service information provided by the service agencies, such as types and hours of service, cost, and reason for termination. The Orange County Regional Diversion Projects provide direct service to clients, and so their client files contain more information on the service process, in addition to the referral information from the police or schools.

In both counties the Sheriff's Department maintains a Central Juvenile Index, as mandated by state legislation, to record police contacts as reported by local law enforcement agencies. We have used these CJI files to furnish information on clients' police records both before and after diversion.

Next we can look at the data collection. The first issue in data collection is obtaining access to the information. In order to meet statutory requirements for maintaining the confidentiality of juvenile police records, it was necessary for us to obtain a court order allowing use of the information in police files, for both the initial police referral forms and the CJI records. Codes protecting counselor/client confidentiality may impose restrictions on access to client files at counseling agencies. In Los Angeles County this issue has not caused problems because the diversion projects have been able to supply us with the information we need as it is given to them by the service agencies. In Orange County, however, where the projects provide direct services to the diversion clients, service information

is kept in the counselors' file on each client. We were able to arrange access to these files after the evaluation staff members each signed an oath of confidentiality. Both types of restrictions--legal and ethical--require that client names be kept separate from detailed client information, and that lists of names be kept in locked files. These requirements have meant that we, as evaluators, have had to exercise great care to preserve confidentiality at each stage of data collection.

Although the issue of access to data is primarily a legal one, we have found that politics surrounds the diversion projects and has affected our data gathering. Competing agencies and departments may utilize legal ambiguities regarding access to impede evaluation. In Orange County, for example, the probation department has not made its records available for comparison of services or costs. In two of that county's six projects probation officers do some of the counseling, and in these two projects the records were closed to the evaluators until the juvenile judge defined them to be diversion, and not probation, records.

The second issue in data collection is the development of collection instruments and coding schemes. The goal is to gether the data as efficiently as possible, while still capturing the variability across individual clients and projects and maintaining accuracy and reliability in coding. Here we have found it valuable to sample as many different files and projects as possible before we develop the final transcription sheets, and then to write standard procedures for coders to follow. Also, transcription sheets which closely follow client record forms provide for speedier and more accurate coding, and we have tried to adhere to this principle wherever we could.

The timing of data collection depends upon the type of information and the uses intended for the information. For example, in the Los Angeles County projects we began by coding all new referrals and terminations on a monthly basis and by making monthly updates of service information for ongoing clients, since in the developing stages of the projects this information was particularly helpful to them. However, now that the projects are well-established and no longer need constant updating of client information, we code client and service information at referral and termination only. The evaluation of the Orange County projects did not start until the projects were firmly established, and cases have been coded only at termination. For this county we have had to rely on client rosters and logs to fill in the missing information on initial points in the client flow. CJI checking has routinely been done six months after the client's referral to the diversion project, since this is the time period we have chosen for our recidivism measure.

The final step in the tracking/monitoring process is the data processing, putting the data on the computer file. This requires careful checking both before the data are keypunched and after they are entered into the computer. It is here that certain errors in client rosters, records, and coding become apparent. The unsung hero and heroine of the entire client tracking process are our systems analysts, who bring final order to the many steps involved in client tracking.

Practical Problems

There are a number of problems that we have encountered in our project monitoring, and I'll mention a few here briefly. First and foremost is the difficulty of persuading people who are not social scientists working

in evaluation to keep their records complete and accurate. Although clinically trained counselors find this paperwork particularly abhorrent, they are not the only ones who are lax in record-keeping. In getting data from CJI in Orange County we found that the vast majority of the juveniles were recorded as being male Caucasians, despite the fact that the youth's name, and in some cases our own records, would indicate that this was inaccurate. This brings up the second problem, and that is meshing data from different sources (rosters, client files, CJI). Not only is the task itself difficult, but it provides many problems in handling inconsistent, discrepant information. Last is the problem of changing political events which may affect project goals, the evaluation, and data collection. Although it is almost a truism to say that evaluators must maintain their flexibility, this is sometimes quite difficult when we are also trying to maintain consistency, particularly in the way we monitor and report client flow.